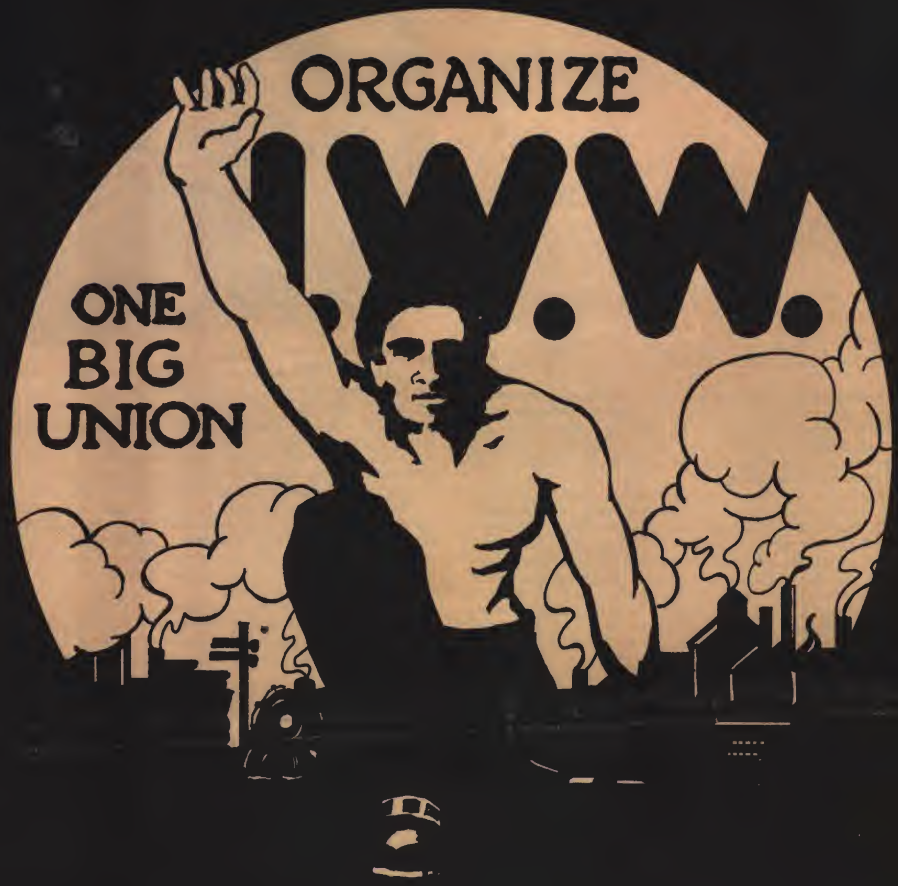

The Wobblies

A film by Stewart Bird and Deborah Shaffer.

"The world cannot run without labour. You are only poor, but without you the world is nothing."

WHO WE ARE

This pamphlet is produced by the Industrial Workers of the World. We are a labor union founded in 1905 on the principles of militance, solidarity, democracy, and industrial unionism. We believe that we who work for a living have nothing in common with those who own for a living: the employing class. They need us to work for them. We don't need them to push us around and take the lion's share of what we produce.

We think that direct action is the only way we ever have gotten or ever will get anything from the employing class, since the only power we have that they will respect comes from the fact that we do the world's work.

If you want to know more about our union, or get more copies of this pamphlet, write to the IWW General Administration, 752 West Webster Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60614, USA, or to your local IWW branch or delegate. This pamphlet is a revised and updated edition of a special supplement to the September 1974 issue of the Industrial Worker, our monthly newspaper.

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A WORKER'S GUIDE TO DIRECT ACTION

Industrial Workers Of The World

INTRODUCTION

We all face the day-to-day hassles with the boss. Firings, speedup, general harassment and intimidation. Over the years, different ways have developed of dealing with these hassles. Unorganized workers simply endure or quit. The AFL-CIO-CLC officials — and those of other "business" unions — hoard up big strike funds and depend on the step-grievance procedure whereby a dispute goes through a series of conferences and ends up being decided by an "arbitrator": usually a lawyer or professor.

Trouble is, enduring leaves things just as they are. Quit, and the next job — if you can find one — is likely to be just as bad.

Business-union tactics — though better than nothing — leave a lot to be desired too. A big treasury makes a union much more vulnerable to court injunctions (stop picketing, stop boycotting, stop striking, maybe some day stop breathing) and the fines that go with them. Also the money tends to get used for other things besides strikes. For example, the railroad unions for many years owned a number of non-union, low-wage, death-trap coal mines. George Meany, head of the AFL-CIO, is part owner of a non-union sweatshop baseball factory in the Dominican Republic. The step-grievance procedure is clumsy and slow, and the well-off "professionals" who serve as arbitrators have more in common with the boss than with us, so that it generally takes six months to a year to lose most of the grievances.

There is another way to take care of business. It's called "mass grievance" or "direct action", which means that we use our power to stop or mess up the job we're working at to settle any gripes we have — our way!

The best-known kind of direct action is the walkout or long strike. Long strikes are sometimes necessary, and will be discussed in another pamphlet. But they cost too much and are too exhausting to be used often. This pamphlet lists eight on-the-job direct-action tactics that can be used without walking out or losing pay.

A word of caution. These are tactics, not magic. To use them you need job organization — that is, at least general

agreement that conditions on the job need changing and that this is the way to change them. Also, you should remember that the boss thinks that anything but passive submission on your part is a threat to him and his profits. You should be ready to use direct action to protect yourself and your fellow workers from firing and discrimination as well as to win your demands.

We hope this pamphlet will be useful to you, our fellow workers, in dealing with your boss. But we hope it will be only the beginning of a sharing of ideas and experiences. If there's a tactic that's worked for you, and you don't see it here, send it in so we can all share it!

CONTENTS

It's a well-known fact that people will work best when they're happy. So if the boss does something that makes you unhappy, naturally you can't get as much work done, right?

The slowdown has a long and honorable history. In 1899 the organized dock workers of Glasgow, Scotland demanded a 10% increase in wages, but met with the refusal of the employers. Strike breakers were brought in from among the agricultural laborers, and the dockers had to acknowledge defeat and return to work at the old wage scale. But before they went back to work, they heard this from the secretary of their union:

"You are going back to work at the old wage. The employers have repeated time and again that they were delighted with the work of the agricultural laborers who have taken our places for several weeks during the strike. But we have seen them at work. We have seen that they could not even walk a vessel and that they dropped half the merchandise they carried; in short, that two of them could hardly do the work of one of us. Nevertheless, the employers have declared themselves enchanted with the work of these fellows. Well then, there is nothing for us to do but the same and to practice ca' canny. Work as the agricultural laborers worked. Only they often fell into the water. It is useless for you to do the same."

This order was obeyed to the letter. After a few days the contractors sent for the secretary of the union and begged him to tell the dockers to work as before and that they were willing to grant the 10% increase.

More recently in a Ford plant: "The Company cited as a typical instance of restriction of effort the case of the headliners whose job it is to fit the interior rooflining in a vehicle. It has been calculated that with reasonable effort a headlining in a small car can be fitted in 22 minutes, which means that in a regular 8-hour shift at least 20 should be fitted by each employee in a section. The Company stated that the headliners had repeatedly refused to fit more than 13 heads in any one shift, saying that management's request was unreasonable. 'And yet,' the Company's statement continued, 'they had in fact fitted each headlining in less time than allowed and spent the remainder of the time between jobs sitting down. Any attempt by supervision to improve the situation resulted in a "go-slow" by these employees. They took so long over each car that they prevented other employees on the line from performing their operations, thus causing congestion and frequently leading to lines being stopped and sometimes to other employees being sent home.

"'This also takes place when the headliners are suffering any type of grievance, real or imaginary. On one occasion the Company had no alternative but to send other employees home at 3:30 as a result of such activity.... Shop stewards, however, supported by the Convenor, had always maintained on these occasions that the employees concerned were working normally, and refused completely in spite of numerous appeals to persuade their members to remove restrictions.'"

This heart-rending wail from the Ford Company was published in the report of the Jack Court of Enquiry (CMDE 1999 April 1963, HMSO, Page 57). It's too bad that "working normally" is not as common in the Ford plants as it should be. It's also too bad that there are so few shop stewards that will support their members in doing so.

During the Depression, IWW members in the Kelsey Wheel Corporation found the slowdown an effective counter to speedup.

At Kelsey Hayes Wheel Corporation in Detroit, according to reports of an Industrial Worker correspondent, the workers devised "the mass thirst strike" as a way of eliminating speedup, an ingenious device for driving the bosses insane. During summer hot spells, the workers were found absenting themselves from the fast-moving points of production motivated by a common impulse to drink at the same time. When the bosses, infuriated, saw that nothing could slake the thirst of the workers so effectively as a slowdown of the line and a raise in pay, they were forced to capitulate to this "mass insanity".

"If managers' orders were completely obeyed, confusion would result, and production and morale would be lowered. In order to achieve the goals of the organization, workers must often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority. Without this kind of systematic sabotage, much work could not be done."

Social Psychology of Industry
J. A. C. Brown

Almost every job is covered by a maze of rules, regulations, standing orders, and so on, many of them completely unworkable and generally ignored. This is especially true of government jobs and jobs in industries that have a lot of governmental regulation. Here's what happens when the rules are followed to the letter:

In France, in Britain, partially in the US, and in many other countries, the increasingly unprofitable railroad systems have been taken over by the governments. Since striking against the government is always illegal, other ways of expressing grievances were found.

Under nationalization, French strikes were forbidden; their fellow workers were delighted to urge the railroad workers to carry out the strict letter of the law. One French law tells the engine driver to make sure of the safety of any bridge over which his train has to pass. If after personal examination he is still doubtful, then he must consult other members of the train crew. Of course the trains ran late!

Another law for which French railroad workers devel oped a sudden passion related to the ticket collectors All tickets had to be carefully examined on both sides. The law said nothing of city rush hours.

Postal workers have always been forbidden to strike. But in their passion for rules, the governments have given them a powerful weapon. In Britain, 1962:

"The work-to-rule began at midnight January 1st. By the 4th Mr. Bevins, Postmaster General, stated 'For the time being the Post Office cannot accept any postings of advertisements and circulars at printing paper and reduced rates....' On January 6th Cyril Hers, Controller of the Mount Pleasant Sorting Station, stated 'Normally we have 600,000 items here. Now, after staying all night at the office, there are 3,000,000. We are losing leeway at the rate of 750,000 a day.'"

Evening Standard, January 6th, 1962

By January 8th mail due for sorting was being directed as far away as Edinburgh, Portsmouth, Petersborough, and Cardiff. This diversion of mails created its own problems. A union spokesman "claimed that 350 bags of correspondence for Essex diverted from Mount Pleasant to Petersborough had been relabeled and sent back to Mount Pleasant because the Petersborough Post Office was full. On receipt at Mount Pleasant postal authorities had ordered the 350 bags sent immediately back to Petersborough."

Evening Standard, January 10th, 1962

Work to rule can be used other ways too. Workers in a Chicago machine shop which specializes in building and erecting custom-designed printing presses were angry about an engineer who kept bothering the machinists: looking over their shoulders, criticizing, harassing and generally giving people a hard time. Like most engineers, he had never worked as a machinist, and was always designing unworkable parts, assemblies, etc., which the machinists reworked into usable machinery. To get this nitwit off their backs, the machinists built one press exactly to the engineer's specifications. On the date the press was due to be delivered, it wouldn't work at all. Six months later, it was working at less than half the speed it was supposed to work at. The engineer was fired and replaced with someone more reasonable.

One of the biggest problems for workers in the service industries is that they can end up hurting the consumers (mostly fellow workers) more than the boss. This isolates us from public support, and besides nobody wants to mess people up. One way around this is to provide better or cheaper service — at the boss's expense, of course.

Workers at l'Hopital de la Merci (Mercy Hospital) in France, afraid of patients dying if they struck, instead refused to file the billing slips for drugs, tests, treatments, and therapy — usually filled out by nurses, aides, technicians, and ward clerks. As a result patients had better care, since time was being spent caring for them instead of on paperwork, and the hospital's income was cut in half. Panic-stricken, the hospital gave in to all the workers' demands after three days.

In Portugal, where strikes were illegal and dangerous until recently, workers found other ways of making their employers come across.

Lisbon, 1968: "Lisbon bus and train workers gave free rides to all passengers today. They were protesting because the British-owned Lisbon Tramways Company had not raised their wages. Today, conductors and drivers arrived at work as usual, but the conductors did not pick up their money satchels. On the whole, public support seems to be behind these take-no-fare strikers, and the schoolboys are having the time of their lives. Holidays have begun, and they are hopping rides to pass the time."

The Times, July 2nd, 1968

In New York City IWW restaurant workers, after losing a strike, won some of their demands by heeding the advice of IWW organizers to "pile up the plates, give 'em double helpings" and figure checks on the low side.

A strike doesn't have to be long to be effective. Timed and executed right, a strike can be won in minutes. Such strikes are often "sitdowns" when you just stop work and sit tight, or "mass grievances" when everybody leaves work to discuss some matter of importance with the foreman, supervisor, or whatever.

The Detroit IWW employed the sitdown to good effect at the Hudson Motor Car Company from 1932 to 1934. "Sit Down and Watch Your Pay Go Up" was the message that rolled down the assembly line on stickers on pieces of work. The steady practice of the sitdown raised wages 100% (from 75¢ an hour to $1.50) in the middle of a depression.

Steelworkers in a mill where the union was almost nonexistent won the rehiring of a fired fellow worker and a raise by shutting down the rollers and the pickle (two medium-size departments in a big mill) and going together to talk to the supervisor about it. Always outnumber the other side!

And then there are those moments when the boss needs you so badly that he'll concede whatever he has to....

IWW theater extras, faced with a 50% pay cut, waited for the right time to strike. The play had 150 extras dressed as Roman soldiers to carry the Queen on and off stage. When the cue for the Queen's entrance came, the extras surrounded the Queen and refused to budge until their pay was not only restored, but tripled.

There exists today a labor market in which wage workers sell their labor power to perform certain tasks asked of them by their purchasers, the employing class. The labor power of the workers is a commodity. In selling their merchandise, workers must sell themselves with it. In purchasing goods from a businessman, you get low quality for low price. A worker, however, is supposed to be best quality no matter what the price. But why shouldn't the same standard apply for workers as for bosses? For low pay and bad working conditions, inefficient work.

Some kinds of inefficiency are illegal, and all are considered "wrong" by many people. But the employing class uses its own "inefficiency" whenever it wants. The oil companies held back oil in the first part of 1974 to drive prices up and independent oil companies out of business. Destruction of food is a routine part of the US agricultural corporation's bought-and-paid-for Department of Agriculture programs. This in a world where hundreds of thousands — even millions — of children starve to death every year!

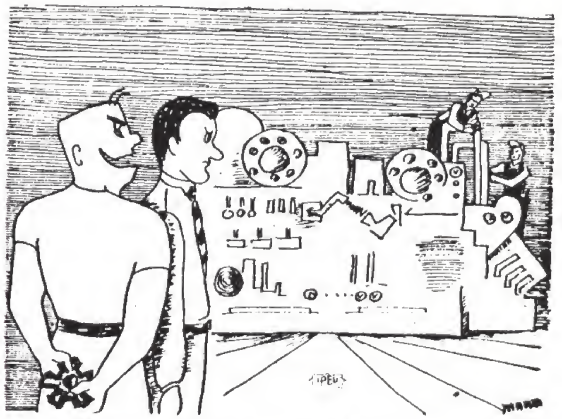
Working-class "inefficiency" is used more often than you would think — especially in factories with unbearable working conditions. Although often used by frustrated individuals, it is most effective — like all direct-action tactics — when all or most of the workers on a job are in on it.

The auto plants, where the unions have traded working conditions for wages and benefits (instead of demanding good pay AND good working conditions) are among the worst places to work in modern industry. At one plant: "When the line got over sixty, say, someone would just accidentally drop a bolt in the line, and as soon as it had worked its way around to the end, bang — the line would stop. There would be a delay, and everyone would take their break."

The many small sweatshops that infest especially the chemical and textile industries give the auto industry competition for the worst hellhole prize. In one shop in northern Massachusetts: "I ran a machine that ground up scrap rubber which was mixed with chemicals and turned into padding. The grind went into a tank, and a light went off when the tank was full. The shift going off would chuck a rock at the light and break it, and I'd lean into my work like I was bucking for foreman. The tank filled up, then the pipes, then what do you know? The grinder started smoking, and I'd have to shut it down. Then, on the line, the backing started ripping, and the cooling spray kept going on the fritz. Nobody was sure what was going on, but it did seem to get better after we got that dust filter, and a raise we hadn't even asked for!"

One question that always haunts a strike call is the question of strike breakers. In a railroad strike in 1886, the scab question was solved by strikers taking "souvenirs" from work with them. Oddly enough, the trains wouldn't run without these keepsakes, and the scabs found themselves with nothing to do.

Inefficiency has even been used as a direct bargaining counter. In New York, movie-theater operators and projectionists got a 15% raise through an unofficial campaign which had startled audiences with films shown upside-down, strange noises from the speakers, mixed reels from other films, and films on the ceiling and walls instead of the screen.



"Pretty Complicated Machine, Isn't It, Boss?"

Sometimes telling people the simple truth about what goes on at work can put a lot of pressure on the boss. Consumer industries (restaurants, packing plants, hospitals, and the like) are the most vulnerable.

"Open mouth" direct action shows the weapon at its best. It allows the spy but little place to act, does not allow the use of police, and strikes at the fraudulent practices which business for profit is based on.

Commerce today is founded on fraud. Capitalism's standard of honesty demands that the worker lie to everybody except his employer. An honest businessman is a myth, and an honest clerk couldn't sell the shoddy goods of the businessman. There is not a single area of the commerce of the entire world where honesty would not spell ruin under present conditions.

In the foodstuff industry the open mouth is particularly effective. Its use will enlist broad public support. Workers, instead of striking, or when on strike, can expose the way food is prepared for sale.

In restaurants, cooks can tell what kinds of food they are expected to cook, how stale foods are treated so they can be served. Dishwashers can tell how the dishes are "washed".

Let construction workers make known the substitutions that are always made in construction materials, and the cheating on fire and safety regulations.

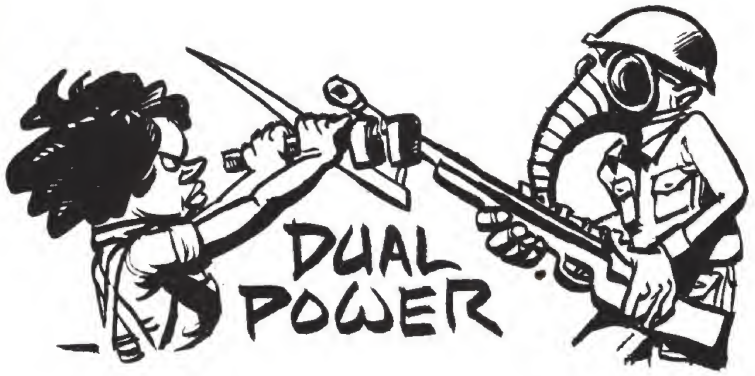
Factory workers can tell of goods piled up beyond the fire limit, and the kind of materials used in most of the products people use. Workers on railroads and busses can tell of faulty engines, brakes, and repairs. Marine transport workers would do well to tell of insufficient lifeboats, life jackets, and so forth.

The persistent use of the open mouth, besides gaining demands, will do more to eliminate abuses than all of the "Pure Food" and "Safety" laws that will ever be passed.

The sick-in is a way to strike without striking. The idea is to cripple your workplace by having all or most of the workers call in sick on the same day or days. Unlike the formal walkout, it can be used effectively by departments and work areas, instead of only by the entire workplace, and can often be used successfully without formal union organization.

At a New England mental hospital, just the thought of a sick-in got results. A steward, talking to a supervisor about a fired union member, mentioned that there was a lot of flu going around, and wouldn't it be too bad if there weren't enough people to staff the wards. At the same time, completely by coincidence, of course, dozens of people were calling the personnel office to see how much sick time they had. The supervisor got the message and the union member was rehired.

At one major Chicago hospital, during a union organizing drive, the night shift on one of the most pro-union wards came in to find that their schedules had all been changed without notice. The night shift replied by calling in sick — all of them — for three days in a row, forcing nursing supervisors who hadn't handled a bedpan in years to do honest work again. When the night shift came back, they found the supervisor only too glad to put the schedule back the way it was.



Sometimes the way to get what you want is to take it. This requires better and stronger organization than any other direct-action tactic. It also works best.

You see, if we decide that we're gonna do what WE want to do instead of what the employing class want us to do, there isn't a whole lot they can do to stop us. We kind of outnumber them. Besides, we do all the work. This tactic has been used pretty exclusively by the IWW. (Not that we're trying to hog it. Feel free.)

IWW lumber workers in the Pacific Northwest used dual power to get the eight-hour day (they had been working 10 to 12 hours). A strike had been on since July 4th, and was facing heavy going due to government harassment of picket lines and closing of halls and offices, when on September 7th union loggers voted to go back to work and simply take the eight-hour day themselves. This was decided in a series of meetings the strikers held in each district. As in all IWW strikes, the strikers made all the decisions in beginning, running, and ending the strike.

At each logging camp, workers would work eight hours, then stop. Since all but a very few loggers were in the union, and since the strike had driven up the price of and demand for lumber, this "strike on the job" (as it was called at the time) was effective. Camp after camp gave in to the eight-hour day, and bosses seldom risked further disruption by trying to cut pay back. In areas where camp bosses tried firing "troublemakers", or even whole "troublemaking" crews, the fired workers were replaced by others just as determined to get the "troublesome" eight-hour day. Fired workers got jobs at other camps and continued to make "trouble" for the eight hours. On May 1st the lumber bosses gave in, and the eight-hour day became the rule in the camps where it hadn't already been won.

The IWW loggers celebrated by starting another dual-power "strike on the job" to remove another long-standing grievance. Workers in the lumber industry had to live in isolated camps built and maintained by the lumber companies. To save money for the companies, workers were expected to provide their own bedding, usually a "bindle" or blanket roll. The bosses provided only hard wooden double-decker bunks. Since there were no laundry facilities, the "bindles" were always infested with insects. To make it clear that they would not put up with this any longer, the lumber workers burned their bindles, forcing the companies to either provide beds and bedding or have no workers. By a long series of such actions, IWW lumber workers won decent food, laundry rooms, showers, single beds with mattresses and bedding supplied, and an end to overcrowding in the bunkhouses.

At around the same time, a strong IWW Marine Transport Workers Union existed on trans-Atlantic shipping out of the port of Boston. One of the main grievances of the workers on these ships was the quality of the food served aboard ship. Acceptable menus were decided on and published by the Union. The cooks and stewards, being good union members, refused to cook anything except what was on the menus — to the satisfaction of everyone except the boss.

In the early '40s, due to war orders, IWW metal shops in Cleveland hired new workers. This led to long lines waiting to punch in or out. The companies refused to install new time clocks, saying that none were available. One day, the day shift went home without punching out. The clocks were installed the next day.